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ABSTRACT

This brief bulletin addresses seven "myths" of tracking or ability grouping with gifted students in response to what is seen as a current movement against both ability grouping and tracking, which are characterized by the "anti-tracking" movement as inflexible and unaccommodating of a varied schedule. The following myths are countered: (1) tracking and ability grouping are the same thing; (2) ability grouping is elitist; (3) ability unfairly discriminates against racial and ethnic minority students because they are not equitably represented in gifted programs; (4) gifted students will make it on their own and grouping them by ability does not result in improved learning or achievement; (5) providing heterogeneously grouped cooperative learning experiences is most effective for serving all students, including the gifted; (6) assuring that there are some gifted students in all classrooms will provide positive role models for others and will automatically improve the classroom climate; and (7) all children at a certain grade level should be reading grade level material in a whole language learning environment. (Contains 25 references.) (DB)

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PENNSYLVANIA ASSOCIATION FOR GIFTED EDUCATION

Bulletin -- Tracking, Ability Grouping and the Gifted

Pennsylvania Association for Gifted Education (since 1953)
Affiliate Chapter of the National Association of Gifted

A Special Pennsylvania Association for Gifted Education Publication

One trend that currently seems to be taking the educational world by storm is the anti-tracking movement. In the '90s, this movement suddenly has become anti-ability grouping. The purpose of this bulletin is to roll away the clouds of misconception about ability grouping and to shine new light on current research related to meeting the educational needs of all students in our schools, including the gifted.

Myth #1: Tracking and ability grouping are the same thing.

REALITY

Tracking means that students are assigned to instructional groups **full-time** based on a variety of criteria, including presumed ability derived from achievement test scores and past performance. Ability grouping, on the other hand, usually occurs when teachers group and regroup students who would otherwise be assigned to heterogeneous classes for the purpose of providing curriculum aimed at a common instructional level. Ability grouping does **not** imply permanently locking students out of settings that are appropriately challenging for them; it only means placing them with others whose learning needs are similar to theirs for whatever length of time is best.

A variation of grouping practices is called "cluster grouping." Four to eight identified *gifted* students at a particular grade level or in a specific subject area are clustered in the classroom of a teacher who has had training on how to differentiate curriculum and instruction appropriately for them. The literature indicates that gifted students need to be with their intellectual peers in order to be appropriately challenged and to get a realistic view of their own abilities (Feldhusen, 1990). With cluster grouping, all other students are grouped heterogeneously; gifted students are the *only* students to be grouped together.

Myth #2: Ability grouping is elitist.

REALITY

Elitism might well be defined as arbitrarily giving preference to some group based on a misperception of superiority. Being able to function at an advanced level intellectually does not, automatically, make an individual "better than" anyone else. It does, however, imply a difference that requires an educational response that may be erroneously interpreted by some as giving one group an unfair advantage. In fact, educators of the gifted consistently work to help develop an understanding of giftedness in the context of individual differences rather than as an issue of superiority versus inferiority. This is totally consistent with newly-emerging approaches, such as the middle school philosophy, that consider cognitive and affective development as being equally important.

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In reality, keeping one or two highly-gifted students in a classroom of mixed abilities actually may have the effect of creating snobbery. Imagine, if you will, the gifted student always getting the answers right, always able to offer complex ideas to class discussions far ahead of the other students. Unless high-ability students are placed in situations where they can interact with intellectual peers, the chances that they will develop an elitist attitude **increase**.

Interestingly enough, educators have no qualms about identifying outstanding talent in athletics and providing specialized programs for students who excel in that area. As Tammi (1990) commented, "Not all students have the ability or desire to participate on a varsity sports team, yet I have never heard any school official argue that singling out talented athletes for team membership to the exclusion of others is elitist. In fact, school districts and local community agencies go to great lengths applauding these athletes' efforts and supporting them in their development" (p. 44). A similar (though not quite so well funded) example exists in relationship to giftedness in music. If support for students who demonstrate extraordinary talents in these areas is not considered elitist, why should intellectual giftedness be given short shrift?

Myth #3: Ability grouping unfairly discriminates against racial and ethnic minority students because they are not equitably represented in gifted programs.

REALITY

Widespread efforts are being made by educators of the gifted to overcome the inequities of standardized test scores and assumptions often made about students who, although gifted, may not be high achievers with positive attitudes toward school. One trend has been away from sole reliance on standardized tests toward training teachers to identify gifted students by observing their behavior. Behavioral descriptors also are being used to identify other under-represented and underserved gifted populations, including pre-school and kindergarten children (Rogers and Silverman, 1988), creative thinkers (Davis and Rimm, 1985), non-productive gifted students (Delisle, 1981) and gifted students with learning disabilities and other handicaps (Whitmore and Maker, 1985).

Eliminating ability grouping because of inequitable identification procedures is tantamount to throwing out the baby with the bath water. The intent has not been to exclude certain populations. The identification procedures used in the past clearly need to be revised, and improved methodology is already being implemented.

Myth #4: Gifted students will make it on their own; grouping them by ability does not result in improved learning or achievement for them.

REALITY

Studies by Feldhusen (1989), Kulik and Kulik (1991) and Oakes (1986) confirm what gifted educators have known for years: gifted students benefit both cognitively and affectively from working with other gifted students. Feldhusen reviewed data from several studies conducted by himself and his colleagues and concluded "...that grouping of gifted and talented students in special classes with a differentiated curriculum, or as a cluster group in a regular heterogeneous classroom (but again with differentiated curriculum and instruction), leads to higher academic achievement and better academic attitudes for the gifted and leads to no decline in achievement or attitudes for the children who remain in the regular heterogeneous classroom. Gifted and talented youth need accelerated, challenging instruction in core subject areas that parallel their special talents or aptitudes. They need opportunities to work with other gifted and talented youth. And they need... teachers who both understand the nature and needs of gifted youth and are deeply knowledgeable in the content they teach" (Feldhusen, 1989, p. 10).

Although some studies have been done (Slavin, 1990) that indicate no increase in achievement test scores for gifted students who have been grouped with others of like ability, the methodology commonly used in those studies brings the results into question (Featherstone, 1987). Also, ceiling effects make it extremely difficult to determine whether or not students' learning was enhanced by homogeneous

grouping unless off-level testing was used to assess achievement. In other words, grade-level achievement tests fail to reveal growth for students who are already performing at the 97-99th percentile and above. Only by administering instruments designed for older students can the actual achievement gains be determined for students whose performance places them at the extreme upper range.

Another critical issue needs to be considered: what are the goals of the gifted program and is the emphasis solely on increasing academic achievement? Gifted students' learning may well be more appropriately measured by criteria other than higher scores on achievement tests. Developing curriculum for the gifted is based on such relevant principles as focusing on broad-based issues, themes, and problems (Kaplan, 1979). Such a program is more concerned with helping gifted students work together to grapple with global concerns that are complex, highly sophisticated, and "meaty" in nature. Therefore, increases in achievement test scores in specific subject areas are not necessarily an appropriate measure of gifted students' success.

Myth #5: Providing heterogeneously grouped cooperative learning experiences is most effective for serving all students, including the gifted.

REALITY

Every student has a right in a democratic society to learn something in school in each class. However, it is possible that the students who may actually learn the **least** in a given class are the gifted. So much of what they are asked to "learn" may have been mastered in the past. When teachers discover this reality, they frequently use gifted students to help needy students learn. Such experiences rob these students of consistent opportunities to learn through real struggle, and this situation can have a negative impact on them in many ways (Rimm, 1986).

Cooperative learning is designed to be used with *homogeneous* or *heterogeneous* groups. Johnson and Johnson (1989) noted "There are times when gifted students should be segregated for fast-paced accelerated work. There are times when gifted students should work alone. There are times when gifted students should compete to see who is best" (p. 1). Slavin (1990) said that "Use of cooperative learning does not require dismantling ability group programs... in a situation where acceleration is appropriate, cooperative learning is likely to be effective if used within the accelerated class" (p. 7). Furthermore, an important point was made by Silverman (1990) who said, "As children veer from the norm in either direction, their educational needs become increasingly more differentiated. A child three standard deviations below the norm (55 IQ) could not profit from placement in a cooperative learning group in the heterogeneous classroom; neither does a child three standard deviations above the norm (145 IQ)" (p. 6).

What seems reasonable is to allow teachers the flexibility to determine which lessons lend themselves to *heterogeneous* cooperative learning groups and which to *homogeneous* cooperative learning groups and make professional decisions to place students accordingly.

Myth #6: Assuring that there are some gifted students in all classrooms will provide positive role models for others and will automatically improve the classroom climate.

REALITY

Classroom climate is far more dependent on factors other than having gifted students in the room. (See Fraser, Anderson, & Walberg, 1982.) The notion that gifted students will automatically have a beneficial effect on low ability classrooms rests on several questionable assumptions: a) that the lower functioning students perceive themselves as being able to alter the performance gap, b) that gifted students are consistently highly-motivated high achievers who will inspire others to similar accomplishments, and c) that gifted students placed in low ability or heterogeneous classrooms will continue to perform at their peak without being provided with appropriately challenging material at their instructional level or having opportunities to interact with intellectual peers who can stimulate their thinking.

Research indicates that students model their behavior on the behavior of others who are of similar ability and who are coping well in school (France-Kaatrude and Smith, 1985). As Feldhusen (1989) stated, "watching someone of similar ability succeed at a task raises the observers' feeling of efficacy and motivates them to try the task" (p. 10). Furthermore, heterogeneous grouping may have negative side-effects both on the gifted students and on the others. If non-gifted students watch from the sidelines while "the smart one" provides all the answers, their self-esteem suffers. One former student described it this way: "When Bill (the gifted one) was in class, it was like the sun shining on a bright, clear day. But, when he went out to work with other gifted kids, it was like when the sun goes over the horizon. The rest of us were like the moon and the stars; that's when we finally got a chance to shine" (Fiedler, 1980).

Myth #7: All children at a certain grade level should be reading grade level material in a whole language learning environment.

REALITY

A whole language approach to reading instruction could be more appropriate than traditional methods for meeting the reading/language development needs of all students, including the gifted. However, as part of a whole language program, many schools have adopted a policy that requires all students in a class to be using grade level materials. The established policy often includes an expectation that no students will be assigned to basal readers either below or above grade level and that the reading program will consist of whole class instruction focusing on this material. While this practice may allow students who are functioning below grade level to have more positive experiences with reading instruction, it was never the intent of the whole language educators to keep gifted students away from appropriately challenging **literature**, so long as they do not use basal readers assigned to higher grade levels.

One approach to resolving the dilemma is to allow students to demonstrate their mastery of the grade level materials and then become actively engaged in a literature-based program. Once students have provided evidence of their competency with reading skills and vocabulary at grade level through pretesting and other appropriate assessment procedures, they should be grouped within the class to explore good literature and enjoy the challenges that can be provided through literature-based learning.

EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY

Educators should be realistic about individual differences. Teaching students what they already know or are as yet incapable of knowing wastes effort... Yet our ideal is equality, of opportunity if not results, and we should take each student as far as possible. Through the **appropriate** use of ability grouping, all students, including the gifted, can have an opportunity to become all they are capable of becoming (Walberg, 1989).

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